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# Second Life Androgogy and Pedagogy Project – an Evaluation and Review [SLAPPER] - An interim evaluation

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This report provides a context for the GEES SLAPPER project (funded by the GEES Small Scale Project Fund), describing and considering current (and future) progress and hindrances.

## Introduction

Second Life (SL)<sup>1</sup> is a 3D on-line immersive virtual world or 'metaverse' launched by Linden Labs<sup>2</sup> in 2003. It now has tens of millions of square metres of virtual lands and more than 14 million individual users or 'residents' from many countries, over 80% of who are in the age range 18-44<sup>3</sup>. Residents log in and engage with the in-world environment and with each other, each creating a fully customisable avatar that becomes their Second Life persona.

Putting aside the more sensationalist headlines that appear in the tabloids from time to time, multi-user virtual environments (MUVES) such as SL are interesting because they have potential to be rich virtual learning environments (VLEs). There is an understandable curiosity about the extent to which such an environment mirrors the real world and allows users to inhabit persona, interact, simulate, investigate, and learn<sup>4</sup>.

Advocates argue that MUVES can facilitate a much greater degree of interaction between students and their peers, or between students and tutors, compared to more traditional content or student management systems [CMS or SMS] such as, say, Blackboard. Interestingly, in an effort to get the best of both worlds, efforts are being made for better integration - for example between SL and Moodle<sup>5</sup>.

Of course, games and simulations have been used for many years for corporate training<sup>6</sup> and by the military. Such approaches perhaps most naturally lend themselves to a constructivist view of pedagogy where individuals learn by developing their own views through problem-solving, collaboration and personal discovery, and by taking overall responsibility for their learning (including when and where).

Marc Prensky has written extensively about the

use of games and the approach of the new 'Digital Natives' to this kind of learning. There still remains a lack of empirical evidence about whether, or rather how, games facilitate learning<sup>8</sup>.

There has been a large increase in the number of UK higher education institutions that have a presence in SL over the last few years<sup>9</sup> and each is doing different things, for example:

- Thinking individually or grouping together with one or more other HEIs to investigate potential generic uses and applications
- Either actively planning or building on an existing departmental, cross-faculty or campus-wide presence
- Carrying out research
- Developing tools and simulations within SL
- Staging exhibitions within SL
- Using SL to support a course or module in some way

[Adapted from Eduserv Snapshot of SL use in HE/FE<sup>10</sup>].

More current information is available from the Second Life in Education wiki<sup>11</sup> and the Second Life Education wiki<sup>12</sup>.

It is easy to see where this enthusiasm stems from: when HEFCE<sup>13</sup> states that 'The JISC InfoNet report<sup>14</sup> found that the appropriate use of technology is leading to significant improvements in learning, teaching and assessment across the sector and that this is translating into improved satisfaction, retention and achievement.' Coupling such enticing institutional advantages with the benefit of an immersive environment in which participants feel as though they are part of a rich and valuable learning experience makes for an understandably enthusiastic cadre of tutors wishing to investigate this. Having said that, commentary by a number of those at the forefront of educational development in SL<sup>15</sup>, besides championing the advantages, also describe a degree of (the usual) scepticism emanating from some of those amongst us.

Staffordshire University has a number of postgraduate off-campus e-learning environment/

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sustainability awards<sup>16</sup> and it is relatively straightforward to envisage how SL might be used by, say, participation in a virtual field trip or maybe a virtual site visit. Other examples of general applications and case studies can be found within 'Serious Virtual Worlds - A scoping study' by de Freitas, JISC, Nov. 2008<sup>17</sup>.

In SL, you can create objects and textures, build virtual structures, perform, act and role-play, carry out research and investigations, collaborate and discuss. But why would you choose to do it in SL? Well, perhaps you might if you were not able to meet face-to-face and felt that you needed to use something more than just telephone contact or email or instant messaging (IM) to help you engage in your learning and create a feeling of presence and community.

## The project

With this in mind, a GEES project was designed to investigate whether and how SL may offer added value in the delivery of our e-learning programmes. The important thing to bear in mind here is that none of the learners on these awards are physically present on campus and that the courses are run in 'part-time' mode - normally requiring a commitment of 15-20 hours per week. Most of the students are mature and in paid employment. This means that they may be more strategic in their approach to learning and their motivational factors may well be different to traditional on-campus full-time undergraduates<sup>18</sup>.

Specifically, the project has the following aims:

- To evaluate means by which SL can best currently contribute to the delivery of our environment and sustainability off-campus postgraduate e-learning awards
- To identify and prioritise the main pedagogic/ androgogic advantages and challenges
- To review and report on the learner experience of using SL as a learning environment through learners participating in a number of learning/research-orientated projects and/ or tasks in-world and subsequent reflection on methodologies, monitoring, feedback and potential assessments associated with these activities
- To produce an implementation plan that would facilitate inclusion of SL learning activities into delivery of [Staffordshire University's] current off-campus e-learning postgraduate awards

The design involves an induction and orientation programme for the student volunteers (importantly,

pointing out that they are involved \*in\* the research rather than merely acting as guinea pigs) followed by a series of SL learning/research activities designed by tutors and learners. These activities would not form part of the formal indicative content of any of the modules, nor would any be formally assessed. The activities, or virtual quests, would be timed (to try to avoid distractions) - some being individual whilst others were collaborative.

Once completed, learners and tutors will be reflecting on the whole process and reviewing the experience. The outcomes will help us to understand how we might best utilise SL to complement or supplement learning, teaching and/or assessment on these awards. The draft analysis, reflections and conclusions will be collated for circulation and comment from all participants prior to final submission. As part of this process, learners are to be asked to rate the impact that the SL experience has had on their acceptance of a 'gaming' virtual environment as a legitimate learning, feedback and assessment tool - seeking to ascertain, for example, whether it has encouraged collaborative work, whether it has been enjoyable [or more enjoyable in the sense of being a richer environment than a conventional SMS/VLE], technically challenging, overly-distracting, liberating and so on.

An initial in-world event - *Best Practice Models for Assessment and Second Life* - was run as a pilot event in conjunction with Staffordshire University Learning Development and Innovation. This involved participants drawn from the Best Practice Models for E-learning community of practice<sup>19</sup> and helped us to develop the skills needed to plan, organise and host subsequent group events.

The first phase of the project proper involved student engagement and this proved to be a major stumbling block and one that we have not yet satisfactorily resolved. My colleague, Jane Edwards, and I should have guessed that there might be problems in drawing a sufficiently large cohort of volunteers to participate in this project when, on two successive induction workshops for distance learners held face-to-face at the University, only two (of maybe around 40 new students) had ever heard of Second Life and only one of those had looked at it. Not a promising start. Subsequent attempts to explain the project and to ask for volunteers, posted as an announcement on a range of the award modules within Blackboard, elicited zero response. Even the offer of a modest financial inducement to participate (2000 L\$ (Second Life Dollars)- it might sound a lot but it's only about a fiver) was spurned by all. Asking further afield, using various JISC Listserv

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resources, only secured one student... and kind offers from two tutors to see if they could also participate.

The warning signs were already there, if I had chosen to take note of them. A 2007 Ipsos MORI study for JISC<sup>20</sup> reports that 76% of people [in the age range 16-18] never or rarely engaged with SL. Comments such as 'sad' and 'tragic' are quoted in response to questions about the danger of technology being used for its own sake.

So, although these figures relate to a younger age grouping than that of our typical e-learners, bearing in mind my comment earlier about strategic learning by such individuals, it may be that we are a little 'ahead of the curve' on this one. Work at other institutions has been reported as successful with on-campus learners who can be supervised during mass log-in and orientation programmes, and also, notably, for work in the arts, humanities, IT, media, education and psychology fields. As yet, we are seeking an appropriate means of engagement with our constituency before, hopefully, adding environment and sustainability to the list. The UK Open University has already made a substantial investment to begin investigating the potential of SL for distance learners<sup>21</sup> and I await the published outcomes with interest.

## Conclusions so far

SL has many things going for it: participation is (currently) free at the entry level; it is still interesting and unusual; it promotes and facilitates collaboration and it embraces the kind of innovation teachers and learners expect, whether they be 'student' or 'tutor' learners. On the down-side, particularly for off-campus learners who may be using work or library computers to access the SMS/VLE, there are issues such as:

- Hardware – successful working in SL requires a reasonably good computer with a reasonably good video card and appropriate privileges to load the local software onto the machine
- Connectivity – broadband connection or better is a must. This may not be available for some learners in developing countries, for example
- Ownership – is it appropriate to rely on a 3rd party vendor to support content that is integral to the delivery of a module on an accredited/validated award? What happens when Linden's servers go down? what happens if they were to shut their servers down?
- Orientation – to what lengths should one go to in explaining the potential advantages of an immersive experience to potential students when the evidence is not yet available that it is of benefit?

I'm not yet clear what metrics should be used to measure any added educational value here. My inclination is to resist evangelising and base conclusions on evidential inference, but this is not easy when the evidence is hard to come by and the cost of developing SL as a learning tool, in terms of time and energy, can be very high. Whilst continuing to look for ways of attracting student volunteers for the project (all suggestions and genuine offers gratefully accepted) to help evaluate the benefits and the drawbacks I remain open-minded about the rate at which virtual worlds will gain acceptance as yet another cross-disciplinary tool that can be used to advantage in postgraduate learning. It may be difficult to have a true immersive experience if one is concentrating hard on the keyboard and just trying to spell correctly.

As far as my own subject area is concerned, I have yet to find a virtual sewage treatment works in Second Life. I'm working on the skills needed to build one, so this could be a first!

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